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TV relives JFK assassination

* 1963 THE DALLAS TIMES HERALD AND BOB J.

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Television helped put John F. Kennedy in the White House, and his assassination was the first national tragedy shared by millions through the then-young medium. So it's only fitting that television is marking the 25th anniversary of his assassination with a collection of network, syndicated and cable specials dealing with his life, his death and his legacy.

Kennedy was not the first president to appear on television, but in many ways he was the first televised president. His good looks and youthful vitality were tailor-made for the small screen; 28 years after his election as president, he still defines a 10 on the charisma scale for political candidates.

His assassination and its aftermath would have been shocking at any time in history, but the electronic media brought the horror into America's homes with unprecedented speed and vivid verbal and visual images that would forever



haunt those who experienced them. As a result, the Kennedy assassination became an unplanned rite of passage for television news.

"Television has not been the same since — and in a way, the country has not been the same since," said Edwin Newman, host of an Arts & Entertainment Cable Network special that will recreate the television experience of the Kennedy assassination by running the first 4½ hours of NBC News' taped coverage exactly 25 years to the minute after its original broadcast.

Television indispensable

"It gave television a new stature. It created a good deal of respect for television, and in particular, it created a good deal of respect for and even gratitude to television news," Newman added. "I think, in a way, it perhaps made people realize that television was just about indispensable; that if you wanted to know what was going on in the country and in the world, television is something you had to have."

Probably the most controversial of the Kennedy programs is tonight's "American Expose: Who Murdered J.F.K.," a live (via tape delay), syndicated, two-hour special being broadcast locally at 8 tonight on KCOP (Channel 13). In it, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter Jack Anderson promises to present compelling evidence that Kennedy's murder was planned by Mafia kingpins acting on orders from Fidel Castro.

Anderson doesn't absolve Lee



Harvey Oswald, whom he says was hired by the Mafia as a fall guy, but he does believe that there were other gunmen involved.

"Who actually hit Kennedy, we don't know," Anderson said recently. "I don't think that I have a smoking gun. I'm not going to make that claim. I do think I have more evidence than the Warren Commission. I do think I can answer more questions than the Warren Commission answered. I do therefore think that we ought to overturn the Warren Commission's verdict and that history ought to come down with a different answer."

"We will show pictures that have never been seen . . . We will offer the testimony of witnesses who have never spoken before (including a scheduled live interview with Oswald's widow, Marina) . . . We'll present, in my opinion, an overwhelming, compelling case for conspiracy, and we'll name who the conspirators are."

"American Expose" isn't the only show to look into the conspiracy theory. At 8 p.m. Nov. 15, the PBS science series "Nova" examines challenges to the Warren Commission's conclusions about the forensic evidence in a special report called "Who Shot President Ken-

The nation watched as Jack Ruby fatally shot accused presidential assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. Television brought Lyndon Johnson, left, Robert and John F. Kennedy to America's homes.

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nedy." The show repeats at 4 p.m. Nov. 20.

Narrator Walter Cronkite introduces segments focusing on ballistic tests that seem to refute the "single-bullet theory," a police acoustic record that may or may not reveal four shots were fired and apparent discrepancies between reports from physicians who examined Kennedy's body at Dallas's Parkland Hospital and the findings of the autopsy performed six hours later at Bethesda Naval Hospital. "Nova" found no irrefutable proof that the Warren Commission erred.

The case gets a fictional day — two days, actually — in court in "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," a 1985 Showtime-London Weekend Television special that has been re-edited by Tribune Entertainment to include Geraldo Rivera as host.

Vince Bugliosi, the assistant district attorney in the Charles Manson trial, served as prosecutor and Gerry Spence as defense counsel in an unscripted "trial" that was ac-

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tually conducted before jurors who arrived at a verdict. The show will be shown from 7 to 10 p.m. Nov. 22 and 8 to 10 p.m. Nov. 23 on Tribune-owned KTLA (Channel 5). Before the verdict is announced, viewers will be invited to call in their own opinions for a 900-number television poll.

A&E on Nov. 22 will interrupt a biography of Winston Churchill at 10:56 a.m. — precisely the moment NBC interrupted its regular programming 25 years earlier — to present the network's coverage of the assassination. At 3:30 p.m., Newman, who participated in NBC's radio and television coverage, will then host a 90-minute compilation of highlights from the days that followed. The whole package will repeat at 7:56 p.m. the following Saturday, Nov. 26.

A&E senior vice president Andrew Orgel said the idea for the event grew out of an offer by NBC — one of A&E's corporate parents — to make its old material available. Younger members of A&E's target audience, he added, probably were at school and didn't have access to television when the shooting occurred, while older A&E viewers would most likely have been at work, and "I don't think a lot of people had television at work.

"We realized that our target audience — and really the general audience — knew about the event and watched it throughout the weekend, but never really saw it as it happened."

CBS News is also dragging out its archival footage for a more traditional, two-hour special at 9 p.m. Nov. 17 to be anchored by Dan Rather, who as a young CBS correspondent in Dallas gained national prominence for his coverage of the assassination. "Four Days in November" will present highlights of that coverage and, like A&E's presentation, will remind viewers just how much technology has changed the look and the capabilities of TV news.

Other specials will focus on the impact of the Kennedy assassination on the nation through the reminiscences of Americans from all walks of life. Tom Brokaw will anchor NBC News' Nov. 22 special, "JFK — That Day in No-

vember," at 10 p.m. on KNBC-TV (Channel 4), whose participants include Kennedy administration members Ted Sorenson, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Dean Rusk, athletes Stan Musial and Johnny Unitas, author Kurt Vonnegut Jr., TV personalities Jack Paar and David Frost, musicians Leonard Bernstein and Chubby Checker and actor Sid Caesar.

Taking a similar "reminiscence factor" approach, KABC-TV (Channel 7) at 9 p.m. Nov. 21 will present "11/22/63: The Day the Nation Cried," a syndicated show featuring interviews with Peter, Paul and Mary; Isaac Stern; former President Gerald Ford; Coretta Scott King; and Schlesinger. The one-hour special will also include old and new interviews with eyewitnesses, including a couple who threw themselves over their two young children when the gunshots were fired.

"Everybody in this country over the age of 35 remembers exactly where they were when that happened," said Jack Hansen, president of SPR News Source, the syndicator of "11/22/63."

"They can pinpoint the dress they had on, the suit they were wearing. It was the same thing that happened, a generation earlier, with Pearl Harbor. When we presented the program to stations around the country, talking with 35-year-old program directors, one of their responses was that it was the first time they saw their fathers cry."

Two pay cable services are commemorating the anniversary of Kennedy's death with shows focusing on his lifetime. The Disney Channel's "Sunday Night Showcase" series of "Remembering JFK" tributes, which began Oct. 23 with David Wolper's famed 1963 documentary, "The Making of the President 1960," continues this weekend with the first installment of a new three-part biography, "John Fitzgerald Kennedy: A Celebration of His Life and Times" at 9 p.m. Sunday. Wolper's "A Nation of Immigrants," inspired by Kennedy's book, follows at 10 p.m.

Home Box Office's "JFK: In His Own Words," borrowed heavily from Boston's John F. Kennedy library to create a profile built around home movies, news footage and audio recordings of Kennedy himself. The one-hour documentary will have its premiere at 10 p.m. Sunday.